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Posted on Tue, Jul. 08, 2003

### Archeologists stumble upon tomb of ancient Mexican civilization

BY HUGH DELLIOS  
Chicago Tribune

**EL PALMILLO, Mexico** - (KRT) - The team of archeologists waited anxiously as Linda Nicholas lowered her digital camera into the dark space behind the ancient stone door.

From their diggings, the crew from Chicago's Field Museum knew they had just uncovered a 1,500-year-old tomb from Oaxaca Valley's Zapotec civilization. But their suspense at what they would see inside the untouched vault was tempered by concerns that they would find more than jade and pots. One of their fears was that looters would come to their remote hilltop dig.

"The locals were always joking, 'Oh, the treasure of Pancho Villa!' " said Gary Feinman, the team leader and chairman of the Field Museum's anthropology department. "I did not want to see gold."

In five summers atop this cactus-covered hill with the magnificent view, Feinman, Nicholas and their colleagues have been digging for a whole different kind of booty. They are after small clues to human history in the patios and walls they have uncovered in a terraced city that thrived more than a millennium before the Spanish conquest.

El Palmillo was home to a primitive, pre-wheel community that practiced ritual blood-letting, used stone tools that still litter the hillside and had a beauty ideal that included the flattening of heads with boards and drilling stone plugs into front teeth.

Ultimately, the rare tomb the team excavated in May would yield a single jade bead, two dozen unique pots and three badly decayed human skeletons. One of them was in a sitting position but had fallen over, while another collection of bones had been painted red and placed in a wall niche.

Yet, equally important to Feinman and his team was what they discovered on the surrounding terraces. There the team found an intricately designed residential community of symmetric retaining walls and 1,400 multi-roomed houses built from carefully cut stone around plastered patios, each with a fabulous valley view.

On the walls and roofs, Feinman believes the residents cultivated an array of cacti that provided them with food and textiles that allowed them to prosper in an area too dry to grow corn or much else. In fact, their primary staple was probably agave cactus, which the Spaniards later began distilling into mezcal.

Having boxed up and documented their finds for the season, the Field Museum team again is analyzing their data, looking for hints to the mysterious demise of the Zapotecs, a civilization that reached its zenith at Monte Alban near present-day Oaxaca 1,300 years ago.

"I didn't expect to find patios that were plastered. The people who lived here were amazing craftsmen," Feinman said, while hiking up

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the rocky, cactus-lined trail to the tomb site.

Under their broad-brimmed hats guarding against the intense sun, Feinman and Nicholas, who are married, and the rest of their team have become part of the landscape around El Palmillo. On the trails going up, goat herders greet them in Spanish, although the region's main dialect is still Zapotec.

In the shadows of mountains that disappear in the clouds, other pieces of the ancient culture survive. The local village is now in the valley, but peasants still mark their property lines with rows of tall cacti and occasionally wall their houses with cactus fronds.

Lining the highway is one small mezcal dealer after another. Business depends on the trickle of tourists coming up the road, and that is why many residents are eager to see whether the archaeologists can make the area more interesting to outsiders and help keep the local youths from departing for the United States.

"Here, it's pure mezcal," said Pablo Hernandez Jimenez, 74, a farmer who has guarded the Field Museum's dig site for the last five years along with his grandson, Giovanni, 10.

"People here say, 'How nice that they have come,' that something nice will be done for our town," he said. "It will mean more tourists."

Feinman said it's difficult to know the relationship between the ancient hill dwellers and today's valley people. The 16th Century Spanish conquest was a time of such turmoil, displacement and disease that it is not known how many locals survived or how many new people moved through the area, he said.

But, as the archaeologists envision it, the ancient Zapotecs built so many terraces on the El Palmillo hill that it could have looked like a huge layer cake. It was a large condo complex that housed at least 5,000 people, along with their domesticated dogs, turkeys and honeybees.

The theory that the Zapotecs lived off cacti is supported by the fact that Nicholas found all eight types of agave plant on the hill, whereas the adjacent hill has only two. The archaeologists believe the cacti now carpeting the slopes are remnants of the Zapotecs' cultivation.

Feinman, 51, and Nicholas, 52, an adjunct Field Museum curator, said they came to Oaxaca interested in whether the economy and the architecture of the Zapotecs offered clues to the society's disappearance. While the valley is known for its ruins at Monte Alban and Mitla, few everyday houses had been excavated and documented.

In fact, they never set out to dig tombs, nor the mounds and public buildings toward the top of the hill. That would entail a whole other set of permits and requirements to preserve and secure whatever they found.

They stumbled upon the tomb beneath a patio this year after noticing patchwork in the paving of one terrace. Then they discovered a staircase, and then the heavy stone door slightly ajar but not removed since the family closed it 15 centuries ago.

Feinman said they considered not excavating the tomb, and consulted with local Mexican officials in charge of ruins preservation over how to proceed. But in the end, they decided that word would spread too fast and that they should be the first ones inside.

"We had a fear that if we didn't dig it now, we would come back next year and it would be looted," Nicholas said.

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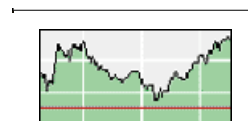
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The team is now speaking with local officials and village residents about establishing a community museum to showcase their finds and possibly a botanical park around the hill to showcase the unique cacti. But holding equal space with the bones and pots from the tomb will be their findings from the terrace patios.

"You've got to look at the houses," Feinman said. "Looking into a tomb that nobody has touched in 1,500 years is a very exciting and very challenging thing, but it's not just about the elaborate or the rich. It's about how people lived their life."

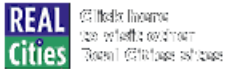
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